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AUTHOR	Frost, Mike
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ABSTRACT

Despite the enduring problems of equity and access in the delivery of education in rural Australian schools, vocational education and training (VET) programs appear to have had a significant impact on many such schools and their communities. Vocational educational programs in Australia are based on structured workplace learning. There are three broad types of VET in Schools programs: 1) those that provide up to 30 days a year of unpaid on-the-job training in the workplace, without contractual arrangement, with the school responsible for all assessment; 2) school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, where students engage in a contract involving paid training with a part-time conventional employer-trainee relationship; and 3) vocational learning programs built on traditional curriculum areas and offering limited workplace experience. These are characteristic of programs in years 9 and 10. Six exemplary programs are described that demonstrate how rural VET in Schools programs have helped rejuvenate communities, address chronic youth unemployment, and confirm the role of the local school as a significant community resource. These programs have encouraged youths to stay in their rural communities rather than pursue post-compulsory education in distant urban schools. In addition, these programs often benefit marginalized youths whose experience of schooling has been unsatisfactory but who respond well to adult learning experiences in workplaces. (TD)

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VET in rural schools

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Mike Frost
(Department of Education, Tasmania)

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Abstract

Despite the enduring problems of equity and access in the delivery of education in rural schools, vocational education and training programs appear to have had a significant impact on many such schools and their communities. Indeed, there is a deal of evidence to suggest that rural VET programs have been instrumental in the rejuvenation of communities, in addressing often chronic youth unemployment, and in confirming the role of the local school as a significant community resource.

The address will highlight how rural VET in Schools programs have been designed and implemented and the kinds of outcomes being experienced by young people. It will draw on a range of exemplars from around Australia across a range of industry areas. It will also highlight how schools and their communities have responded to the factors of isolation and limited workplacements, including particularly creative solutions in some indigenous rural communities.

The presentation will also suggest how enterprise and vocational education programs can become a significant feature in rural and regional development, can contribute to the recognition of the value of developing a culture and practice that embraces skills training, and can assist in better engaging young people in the world beyond.

There is a message of hope here for rural communities who have experienced the loss of services and general decline, particularly where they can recognise the full potential value of their young people.

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you.

I have a particular interest in rural education and in the life of rural communities. I spent some time in my childhood about one hundred and fifty kilometres from here, near Bookham. Indeed my early experience of education was as a correspondence student of Blackfriars in Sydney. Now the 1956 version of Distance Education was quite a bit different to that in 2001. A weekly package of materials arrived, under the conscientious though authoritarian tutelage of my mother, tasks essentially restricted to the three Rs were completed, and the package dutifully returned. Media encounters

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were restricted to ABC Radio's *Kindergarten of the Air*, and *Let's Join In* and in the evenings *The Argonauts Club* reigned supreme. Occasional human interaction occurred when I was discovered daydreaming instead of doing my arithmetic, and the ultimate crime was committed when I left my desk having been distracted by my father passing by with a flock of sheep, or because I believed my young brothers were being threatened by a red-bellied black snake!

Actually it wasn't all that bleak. I developed a great fondness for my Blackfriars teachers, and eagerly awaited the return of my work to read their comments. Once I went and met one on a trip to Sydney, and was re-assured to find that the real life person was every bit as kindly as the one that existed in my imagination.

The relative isolation of life in rural NSW paled into insignificance when my family eventually moved to Flinders Island in the middle of Bass Strait. My father became a War Service Land Settler, and we lived on a farm developed from reclaimed swamp land. While Flinders Island had an area school, by the age of 11 I had passed a selection test to attend high school in Launceston. We travelled backwards and forwards by DC3, and with students from the Tasmanian West Coast towns of Rosebery and Zeehan, and from King Island, we were effectively cut off from our families for the entire term. For most of my high school life I despaired. I missed my family and farm life including friends who elected to remain on the island.

Things have probably not changed all that much. Young people in rural and regional Australia are still faced with the prospect of leaving their families and communities to attend high school, university and TAFE. Their experiences, as a deal of research over the years suggests, are not dissimilar to my own. They experience disengagement from family and community life, peer relationships are damaged, considerable effort is expended in establishing new friendship networks and the quality of what would once have been family life is diminished in boarding school and hostel arrangements. Families and local communities also suffer with the loss of family members, and depletion of the rural youth cohort.

When the decline over the last 50 years in economic and business activity in rural communities, and the decline in rural population as employment activity decreases are

factored in, then the dislocation caused by young people leaving adds a further dimension to the crisis facing many rural communities around Australia. The fact that successive governments, both State and Federal, have done little to intervene in this process of rural decline is in itself a tragedy, although recent recognition in, for instance, the *Report from the Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce* (2001) on the situation facing young people in urban and rural communities and what needs to be done, signals changes may be afoot.

A short history of VET

From 1996 until 2000 I worked as the Executive Officer for the Vocational Education and Training Network or VETNETwork, a national body set up to support teachers and trainers involved in establishing and running vocational education and training programs in schools. Inevitably quite a deal of my work involved identifying and promoting instances of innovative and transferable programs from around the country. On reflection, a surprising number of outstanding, VET in schools programs occurred in rural communities, and were regularly reported on in the national newsletter, *The Vetnetworker*.

Many of these programs demonstrated highly imaginative solutions to the range of problems experienced by rural schools, families and communities, particularly those faced with declines in services, out-migration, the tyranny of distance and limited access to new technology, including communications technology. Some of the initiatives generated incidental, almost accidental outcomes, others unleashed new synergies as stakeholders began to work together, others unleashed formidable political and social forces as local, state and federal government agencies were goaded into action.

At the heart of all of these programs was, however, a thing called structured workplace learning. VET in Schools has, as its origins, several principal policy initiatives. The first derives from the release of the Australian Vocational Certificate Training System Report, chaired by former trade union leader and luminary, Laurie Carmichael in 1992. This recommended, amongst other things, the broadening of the year 11 and 12 curriculum to embrace vocational education subjects, and the use of

'structured work experience'. The Carmichael Report subsequently became the vehicle for the delivery of a wide range of pilot programs that encouraged expansion of school, training and employment pathways, including the use of workplace training and first suggested the place for school-based traineeships.

The Carmichael recommendations and targets certainly informed the Keating government's 1994 White Paper, *Working Nation,* which looked to expand and support the participation of young people in joint school-industry programs with the establishment of the Australian Student Traineeship Foundation. The ASTF had, as one of its key goals, the expansion of structured workplace learning so that school-industry partnerships would evolve as a mechanism for expanding the range of pathways available for young people into training and employment.

There is little doubt that the significant place that structured workplace learning assumed in these early policy efforts derived from the work of the Dusseldorp Skills Forum in establishing Training for Retail and Commerce or TRAC programs in the early 90s. Indeed during the life of the ASTF, much of the funding for innovative vocational programs centred on expanding the opportunities for young people to spend quality time in workplaces.

TRAC was an initiative hammered out with industry and which rested on several, broad, operational principles. These included the notion of students spending one day a week in the workplace undertaking negotiated skills acquisition, with arranged supervision and assessment of skills via an approved skills list. Industry areas were initially restricted to retailing, commerce or clerical and automotive. On the job learning was expected to be supplemented by appropriate school-based programs, and schools and participating business and industry were expected to contribute equitably, in-kind and financially.

TRAC's successes were mixed. In Tasmania and Western Australia the principle of one day a week workplace learning, extended to the AVTS limit of 240 hours maximum for unpaid on-the-job training or 30 days a year, became virtual benchmarks. In Victoria and NSW dual accredited programs involving TAFE and with little workplace training, restricted the take-up of TRAC to rural centres like the

Hunter Valley, Maitland and Junee in NSW, and kept it out of Victoria almost entirely. TRAC appeared to flourish where local school-industry partnerships determined the need for a program offering sustained workplace training time, and where particular personalities urged take-up. Elsewhere there was at times entrenched resistance from department of education and board of studies operatives who saw TRAC as a high-cost, low participation model with serious limitations on access and equity.

The work of the ASTF, now re-badged as the Enterprise and Career Education Foundation (ECEF) has undoubtedly been responsible for raising the profile of structured workplace learning. From its establishment in 1995 it has gone on to directly support local, systemic and cross-sectoral programs in all states via innovation and support funding, research, publicity and project initiation. Much of its strategic research effort has gone toward tracking the growth in the use of structured workplace learning. Indeed this has become a central focus for its primary work, at the expense of a wider consideration of VET in schools.

VET in schools

Can I pause for a moment and share with you an experience that confirmed for me, in the clearest possible way, the power of industry-based programs to seriously enhance the life opportunities of young people. In 1993 I taught a young woman – let's call her Kaylene - in a subject called Social Psychology. Kaylene was in Year 11, at Rosny College, and came from a local high school in a deprived socioeconomic area. Her school performance had been mediocre, her attendance poor, and her experience of school generally pretty negative. She certainly didn't want to be at college, the likelihood of her getting a job of any description was low, and she could make no link between school achievement and employability. In class, when she turned up, she was sultry, disinterested and disengaged. Occasionally she came to life when we talked about deviant adolescent behaviour or child development. She wore track pants and oversize tops, she slouched in her seat, and she confirmed in every possible way that she did not want to be at school.

The year finished, she disappeared well before the end, as I recall, and I promptly forgot about her. Until, one day I walked past a local pre-Harvey Norman kind of store selling home furnishings, furniture, electrical goods and the like. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed movement in one of the large shopfront windows. I paused and looked at the young women who was adding the final touches to a most beautiful display. I looked more closely at the architect of this display, sensing something familiar. The perfectly groomed, impeccably dressed, stylish young woman seemed at first appearance one of the professional, artistic designers that big stores use, until she made eye contact and smiled. It was Kaylene!

Kaylene's transformation came through her participation in a TRAC Retailing program. She was actually on a workplacement, and as it turned out so impressed were the store manager and her on-the-job supervisor, that they gave her carte blanche to do the window display. Kaylene was a different person. Her attitude to college had changed, she was far more positive about all aspects of her program, she was clear about seeking a career in retail, she was far more mature, composed, even her confidence in speaking had matured. Little surprise then, that at the end of the year, she had developed a competitive edge in retailing to the point where she won a traineeship against 40 other applicants.

This is not a unique story. Most VET teachers and coordinators around the country will tell you similar ones. Often they will involve parents and teachers who also have been swept along by the momentum of workplace learning and what it can unleash. They often involve marginalised young people, kids whose experience of schooling has been unsatisfactory but who respond well to the adult learning experiences provided in workplaces and the way successful skills acquisition is handled and acknowledged.

a. Emergence of VET in schools

It seems likely that the current, national concept of VET in Schools began to emerge with ANTA funding of state programs beginning in 1996. By 1998 state and federal ministers through MCEETYA had agreed to recognise school-based programs that delivered recognised competencies under the National Training Framework as VET in schools. There appear to be three broad types of VET in schools arrangement,

although variations and permutations within each type are extensive. According to the CEET Stocktake (2001) these are:

1. VET in Schools programs with nationally accredited training delivered across a continuum from fully at school to up to 30 days a year of structured workplace learning. This is unpaid training and does not involve any contractual arrangement, the training outcome usually being recognised in Board of Studies certification processes. Schools tend to assume prime responsibility for all facets of assessment, including on-the-job.

2. School-based Apprenticeships and Traineeships, where students actually engage in a contract involving paid training with the equivalent of one or more days a week being spent in a conventional employer-trainee relationship on the job. These are primarily delivered as traineeships, although apprenticeships in traditional trade areas like automotive, metals and engineering and building and construction are becoming more common , particularly in rural and regional areas.

3. Vocational Learning programs representing a wide range of enterprise, career, work experience, simulation and key competency programs which are frequently built on traditional curriculum areas and have limited workplace experience. They characterise much of the work that has been undertaken in expanding vocational programs into years 9 and 10 in particular.

In addition it seems that a significant proportion of young people gain workplace experience through part-time work, with an estimated 30% to 40% of students engaging in this kind of activity. There has also been some effort to recognise the training that occurs in such arrangements both through recognition of current competency initiatives, and through formal links between schools and local industry.

b. Growth in VET in schools

By 1999 the number of senior secondary students participating in VET in schools programs nationally had reached 130 000, up from 60 000 in 1996 and 26 000 in 1995. By any measure this is an extraordinary growth – indeed on 1998 figures 37% of Year 11 and 12 students in government schools were undertaking some form of

VET in schools programs, and furthermore nearly 60% of them included a workplace learning component. (CEET, 2001, p. 83). In 1999 of 402 429 students nationally in Year's 11 and 12 138 379 were undertaking VET in schools programs (ECEF, 2001). That is nearly 35% of students were undertaking VET programs.

There are some interesting qualitative details now beginning to emerge from this general growth in VET in schools. In summary these can be identified as:

- a trend that sees government schools leading catholic and independent schools in proportions of students doing VET programs;
- less than 50% of schools nationally undertake any kind of structured workplace learning;
- there are significant variations between states in terms of the numbers of students participating in VET in schools programs, with NSW claiming 53% enrolment in VET programs while Victoria and Western Australia had the lowest at 15% respectively (CEET op cit);
- there are even greater variations in the amount of time spent undertaking structured workplace learning. In Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania certainly all VET students in government schools undertake workplacements, with a significant proportion of catholic and independent students doing the same. However NSW has the lowest level with 38% of VET in schools students undertaking structured workplace learning; and
- while VET in schools programs do not appear to have attracted new students in Years 11 and 12 generally, they do appear to have contributed to halting what would have almost certainly been a decline in retention.

There are also some interesting trends affecting rural and regional students undertaking VET in schools programs. VET in schools programs, with a component of structured workplace learning, appear to be over represented by students from regional, rural or remote locations (Fullarton, 1999). A similar trend has been detected in the observation that structured workplace learning programs are found more frequently in low socio-economic areas, particularly in regional urban centres.

Certainly the uptake of school-based apprenticeships and traineeships is far more common in rural areas than urban.

Why rural VET?

Traditionally rural areas have experienced a generally lower retention rate into the post-compulsory years, so that schools have been open to new and innovative strategies to try and retain students. Often these initiatives have been supported by state and federal programs, like the participation and equity programs of the 1980's and the VET in schools programs of the 1990s.

Rural students have also, traditionally, faced the dilemma of leaving their families and schools to commute to or attend city or regional centre schools, particularly if they are perceived to have academic or higher education potential. Schools, as a result, are often left with depleted numbers in years 11 and 12, with the consequent effect on the provision of an attractive or useful program. Those who remain behind very often do so only as long as it takes to persuade parents and teachers that they wish to leave.

The appeal of VET in schools programs in rural schools is grounded in the essentially practical nature and utilitarian nature of them, and in the fact that they are directly perceived to be capable of improving employment opportunities. Historically rural schools have drawn from local industry and agricultural and pastoral enterprise for elements of their programs. In some states the residual links with a past where rural endeavour was more highly valued can be seen in the last remaining agricultural high schools. Since many VET in schools programs have a practical component expressed through structured workplace learning, the appeal for rural students is axiomatic. Confirmation of this comes from the success of school-based apprenticeship and traineeship programs in rural and regional areas, where one or more days a week are spent in the workplace, undertaking paid training. Queensland rural schools have led the nation in the take-up of such traineeships and apprenticeships, where in 1999 upwards of 3 000 mainly traineeships were in place. At the end of the first quarter in 2001, there were 428 school-based apprentices under contract and 2 138 school-based trainees (Department of Employment and Training website). By comparison, in Tasmania for the same period there were less than 20 trainees and no school-based apprenticeships.

The success of VET programs in rural schools, however, is deserving of deeper consideration because there is evidence to suggest that the ramifications will flow well beyond the local school and the standard measures of school performance. I would like to look at a number of case studies which will illuminate particular aspects of this, including the view that school-based VET can substantially contribute to community and regional development, can impact on patterns of employment and economic activity, can affect adult attitudes to learning and can favourably influence cultural activity.

Community development

In the Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce *Footprints To The Future* a clear message emerges about the need for communities to be supported in making better provision for their young people. Recommendations from the report centre on ways of bringing together employers, community agencies, government departments, religious groups, and schools to improve education and training opportunities, and bring coherence to support agencies. In Tasmania an innovative series of partnerships have been struck between a number of local rural councils and the State government to better assist processes for community development. And, as mentioned earlier, the Cape York Partnership is built on a similar notion of mutual support.

There have been a number of notable initiatives in rural Australia that have as their inspiration, a range of vocational education and training program that successfully brought the school into contact with its community in a variety of ways. In all of these it seems to be from the relationships developed between students and local business people, supplemented by the activities of support bodies like school-industry partnership committees that drive wider community development. I would like to share with you several of these initiatives, which I became aware of through my previous work with VETNETwork. They display features which I believe can be replicated elsewhere but which seem significant contributors to a profound recognition of young people as a major community resource.

a. Junee High School

I first heard about Junee High School's TRAC program in 1996 and was struck by the vision that was being developed. Junee had been a town in some decline through changes in the pattern of national rail transport and the decline in the significance of agriculture. Junee High School, like schools in many rural and regional areas of Australia, reflected the general decline of its hinterland. In establishing TRAC in 1993, Junee High School sought to provide a program that would both improve Year 11 and 12 retention, while assisting transition from school to employment and further education.

Its program was not overly ambitious, with VET programs in Retail, Hospitality Studies and Furnishings along with Industry Studies, Metals and Engineering and the generic Work Studies.

The TRAC model mandated particular requirements – a school-industry management committee, one day a week for participants in the workplace, real assessment of workplace and school-based learning, and specific guidelines for teachers and workplace supervisors. Support to run the program eventually came from local participating industries, later the Department of Education and the ASTF put resources into the program.

What appeared to set this program apart, however, was the way in which the local community, including the business community, responded. By actively involving strategic elements of the local community and key agencies, it acquired a highly credible profile with more than 60 local businesses becoming involved. Retention into Year 11 became virtually 100%, young people began finding local employment opportunities opening up as a result of structured work placement and much stronger links between local business, the community and the school. In fact there was some evidence that jobs were actually being created, because businesses could experience at first hand what employing a young person might be like.

In 2000 I had the opportunity to visit the school. Five years on, and with a new principal, Junee's VET program appeared to have stood the test of time well. The principal and co-ordinator were committed to the maintenance of the original one-

day-a week structured workplace learning program, most Year 11 and 12 students were staying on, the local workplacements were well entrenched and there was wide community acknowledgment of the success of the program. More to the point, aspects of pedagogy had begun to inform other aspects of the work of the school, particularly in Year 9 and 10. An enterprising approach was emerging, expressed through work with at risk young people, where links with local youth support agencies were proving productive.

Junee's story is not unique. Country towns all over Australia report the same outcomes when schools, business and the community begin to work in partnership. However, the TRAC program, in requiring a commitment from all stakeholders, including responsibility for local resourcing, guaranteed that the commitment to improving the education and employment outcomes for young people was genuine.

b. Margaret River High School

Western Australia shares, with Tasmania, amongst other things a commitment to maximising the amount of time students undertaking VET should spend in the workplace. Most programs in WA schools spend upwards of 20 days a year sometimes more in the workplace. Margaret River High School confirmed for me, when I visited there in 1997, how placing young people locally in businesses has acted as a major stimulus in engaging community interests and involvement.

Margaret River High School's model of vocational education program has, as a centre piece, genuine community ownership. Brian Middleton, as chair of the local chapter of Rotary observed:

> *The Margaret River community saw as a major responsibility the need to create opportunities in terms of education, training and employment for its young people. The program at the high school has provided an avenue through which this can occur.*

Margaret River High School provides an interesting case where the local management committee has adopted a high profile role in supporting vocational education initiatives. Members visit students on-the-job to demonstrate support, businesses are recruited through networks like Rotary, promotional activities are planned and widespread community involvement is encouraged.

As Committee Chair John Garstone, a local owner of a metals and engineering firm, noted:

> *there is a lot of self-satisfaction and pleasure in seeing young people grow from cheeky, young students to more mature and purposeful people as a result of their time in the workplace. But we have also grown to appreciate how valuable a resource our young people are, not just in terms of recruitment for jobs, but for our whole community.*

This recognition of the value of young people as an asset to the local community is a powerful message, and may well lie at the heart of other successful rural communities. Local businesses are now moving from offering workplacements to providing traineeships - a local service station and a surfboard manufacturer have now used the program to offer traineeships to students. Part of this growing community awareness is reflected in local employers voluntarily undertaking Workplace Trainer Category 2 programs in order to meet workplace assessment requirements. An outcome is a far greater sense of awareness of the value of developing a workplace training culture within the business community.

Margaret River's programs do not differ a lot from VET programs in other rural schools. What the program does demonstrate, however, is how community development, particularly in terms of employment and training, can be assisted when its business community accepts a major role in the provision of training opportunities.

c. Willunga High School

At the 2000 ANTA Awards, the winner of the VET in Schools category was Willunga High School in South Australia. A rural high school, 50 km from Adelaide and adjacent to the McLaren Vale wine growing district, Willunga has captured the imagination of a great many proponents of both vocational education and enterprise-based activity because it owns and operates a successful vineyard.

Students are actively engaged in the production of high quality red wine, high quality white wine and olive oil. In addition they have more recently moved into the food processing industry accessing primary produce from the local area. Students now operate Waverley Park Business Enterprises and Enterprise Centre, a group of six businesses in winegrowing, catering, wood and metal products, including wine racks

and gift boxes, olive-growing and event management of the annual Waverley Park Continuous Picnic.

Not surprisingly, the school has acquired a reputation for its entrepreneurial activity, so that it now has an established relationship with its local community where the school is a catalyst for change. This community leadership has certainly grown from Willunga's strong and committed partnerships with local business and industry, and has helped to increase regional employment opportunities as well as making it a major catalyst for change in the local community.

In a region with among the highest youth unemployment rates in South Australia, the school has achieved steadily climbing enrolments and impressive retention rates. Students now are offered part time traineeships and apprenticeships, they have an extensive structured workplace learning program and they also access business mentoring.

Willunga's 900 students are now working in a learning environment which has a major focus on real-world enterprise and the acquisition of a wide range of employment related skills. Students are given an enhanced understanding of what is available locally in terms of further education and training, as well as careers.

d. Goondiwindi State High School

There are a range of examples around the country where schools have locked onto specific regional industries, establishing close working partnerships with them, in the process expanding career awareness and facilitating school-to-work pathways. Toolooa High School in Gladstone in Queensland has pioneered school-based apprenticeships in metal fabrication and engineering due to the employment demand created by local heavy industries. Hobart College in Tasmania has developed a close synergy with the salmonoid industry, providing a range of entry-level and more advanced training opportunities, for the local industry.

Goondiwindi State High School in Queensland has a taken similar initiative by introducing a school based program to give students a first hand insight into careers in the cotton industry. The school has established a strong presence through its VET in

schools programs in a region characterised by intensive agricultural and pastoral activity. With local support from the McIntyre Valley Cotton Growers Association, Westpac Agribusiness, Queensland Regional Business Advisory Service - Border Rivers and Goondiwindi Cotton, the program will further the school's strategic alliance with the cotton industry to increase employment opportunities for local school leavers.

An important part of this effort was to raise student awareness of the wide range of employment opportunities within the cotton industry which extend to associated industries such as classing, spinning, marketing and research and development. It also had the aim of expanding the prevailing view that rural industry employment is about farming. The cotton industry in fact provides evidence of opportunities across a rural industry and well beyond the farm gate.

The same sentiments lay behind the development of the *Kid Start Farms* program sponsored by food processor Golden Circle and designed to encourage the uptake of rural industry school-based traineeships and apprenticeships. Gary Clark, National Project Manager for Rural Skills Australia has observed that, out of this whole industry approaches:

> *There is a growing acceptance of rural industry VETIS (VET in Schools) within industry, the school system and RTOs, and there is a positive and perceptible change in culture towards training generally.* (Clark, 2000)

School-based apprenticeships and traineeships

School-based Apprenticeships and Traineeships grew out of the earlier Carmichael Report recommendations, and were established by Federal and State Ministerial agreement in 1997 under the New Apprenticeships policy. By 2000 approximately 5 000 of them were in place, the bulk of them being in Queensland. They have been taken up more vigorously in states where VET in schools has not been able to provide substantial structured workplace training opportunity, and least where VET in schools is strongly established. In Tasmania, where a very well established school-based VET program has been in place for some years, there has been very limited uptake.

The Queensland delivery model for school-based apprenticeships is relatively simple and follows a pattern emerging elsewhere in Australia. Students participate in part-time paid work (on the job) for one or two days a week, undertake structured training (off the job) usually with a TAFE college or other Registered Training Organisation and attend school part-time for three to four days per week. School-based traineeships can be completed within the two years of senior schooling, giving students an Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) level II qualification while the school-based apprenticeships are commenced during Years 11 or 12 and are completed post-school.

a. Moura State High School

Moura, inland from the coastal city of Gladstone in Queensland and once a thriving community of 13,000, is a rural town in decline. With coal export prices falling and the mine faced with an uncertain future, as well as hard times on the land, Moura along with other rural communities has suffered real economical hardship.

Moura's business community, in association with the local school, began the process several years ago of strategically addressing the issues associated with decline. One of the solutions was seen in the application of school-based traineeships in key industry areas including retail, hospitality, office administration, service station operation, automotive underbody and rural. This provided a firm measure of the commitment of the community to securing its future economic viability through improving local training and employment opportunities for its young people.

Student trainees involved responded particularly favourably citing 'on the job' experience as complementing school-based work. Trainees valued the fact that they were paid, obviating the need for seeking part-time work, appreciated the care and effort employers showed in creating flexible training arrangements so that school was minimally disrupted and valued the mix of work while still retaining strong links with school.

VET in indigenous communities

There is a wealth of anecdotal and research evidence, now beginning to drive policy, that shows that young indigenous people respond particularly well to vocational education programs in schools and local communities. VET programs have been used with success in western NSW indigenous communities as an interventionist strategy to reduce drop-out rates amongst Year 8 and 9 students (Knipe, 1999). In the Northern Territory they have been used to provide an alternative pathway for students disengaged from conventional school experience through low levels of literacy and numeracy, inadequate and inexperienced teachers and the emergence of youth cultures which militate against regular school attendance (Bettison, 2000).

The place for education and training in indigenous community development is reflected in the partnership agreement established, for example, in the Cape York Partnerships initiative which brings the indigenous communities of the area and the Queensland Government into collaborative action to overcome social, health, economic and educational disadvantage.

a. Community-based partnerships: The Port Keats project

Port Keats is an isolated and disadvantaged NT community of 2 000, of which over 1 200 are under 25. The young men in the community were considered to be particularly at risk. Indeed in a report to a conference hosted as part of the Remote Communities Project, Br Terry Kingston observed the following:

"Among the young men (of Port Keats) a subculture is forming which is oriented toward simple existing: finding something to do each day, watching videos, roaming at night; and some gang formation. The majority of them have minimal contact with the world outside Port Keats and lack awareness of their own potential and the possibilities open to them".

Poor school enrolment and attendance is inevitably linked to over representation at the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre. When the fact that English is spoken very much as a second language, the problems are compounded.

The Port Keats Project used a set of strategies to effectively build the role and place of the young men as valued members of the local community. A central feature of this was the hosting of a group of 12 young white men with 5 staff from a school in Ipswich. The Port Keats young men accepted responsibility for this hosting, the community responded by making available its aircraft, boats, putting on a Corroboree and a farewell feast. The outcomes from this have been a far more positive perception by the community of the young men, greater participation in community meetings and activities, and greater input into community –based projects and funding applications.

The reported outcomes from the project continue to impress. Giving the young men responsibility for acting as cultural guides and peer tutors empowered them and significantly increased their own sense of worth. In turn they become more responsive to the opportunities provided by the project for improving English, for attending and taking up the opportunities provided by school and a growing awareness of what vocational education has to offer.

The community has responded particularly well to the visible celebrations of success – the graduation ceremonies with their presentations and speeches are valued, particularly by parents. As Brother Terry Kingston observes:

> *More and more we recognise the need to work in with the wider community – the Council, CDEP, local industry. We cannot prepare the Kardu Kigay in isolation from the community and workplace. There is obvious support for the Kkardu Kigay from key personnel in the community.* (p. 32)

The social situation faced by the young men of Port Keats has been more widely recognised through the research undertaken by the Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce and lies at the heart of much of the national effort at improving life chances of young, indigenous people. Vocational education and training has the clear potential to improve transition, increase employability, open up local business and employment opportunities and build success. In targeted training areas involving sport, culture, music and media there are some excellent developments involving young aboriginals.

b. Networked learning centres in Tasmania

While Tasmania is acknowledged generally for its VET system, the development of network of district high schools in rural areas across the state has produced an outstanding model of best practice, become a national leader in delivery of VET on-line learning, and a pioneer in creating new opportunities for rural communities.

Prior to 1996 only four Tasmanian rural schools accommodated post-compulsory students on site with limited academic programs. By 2001 80% of all rural high schools and district high schools had restructured their Year 11 and 12 programs to reflect the benefits of vocational based learning programs. These benefits have been identified as:

- increased student motivation;
- higher retention from Year 10 to 12 and particularly during year 11;
- greater community involvement in life long learning programs; and
- greater relevance of the learning program to future work opportunities.

At the heart of the initiative was the establishment of a series of Skill Centres, established with ANTA funding, in most of the more isolated communities. Associated with these were Community Access Centres, developed as part of a state government initiative to increase on-line access in these communities. The schools with an existing, if limited, capacity to offer vocational programs for training provided the essential training infrastructure, as well as access to specialist facilities like workshops, library resources and computers. Schools also were supported to become Registered Training Organisations with their scope of registration reflecting local community needs.

The rural districts were also supported by three regional VET officers particularly skilled in assisting to establish Year 11 and 12 VET and New Apprenticeship programs, generate work placements, source the training for work-place assessors, and develop pathways from years 9-12.

The outcomes from the establishment of these post-compulsory education and training facilities is striking. Students, often with poor literacy, numeracy, social and communication skills, who would have once been forced to continue with Year 11

and 12 programs in urban senior secondary colleges stay local, and stay at school. Participation by young, unemployed or under employed adults in VET programs has grown substantially, as has interest from older groups including parents of the Year 11 and 12 students. The range of options, particularly with increasing on-line delivery of VET programs, is enriching the learning and training opportunities for the community. In addition, local employers are becoming aware of the training opportunities, and are actively supporting and recruiting from the programs.

However it is the increased focus on the school as a centre of learning in the community that captures attention. The programs have assisted schools to enhance their viability and visibility in communities where the local population is static or declining. As well the emergence of a skilled workforce, locally available for rural industries and business is having a direct and beneficial effect on business activity, introducing more modern methods and encouraging the pursuit of new and external markets.

Falk and Kilpatrick (2000), in recognising the significance of schools for their local communities, refer to them being agencies in building social capital through their capacity to build networks and share expertise.

Conclusion

There is considerable interest in improving the opportunities of young people in rural and regional areas of the country.

The MCEETYA *Taskforce on Rural and Remote Education, Employment, Training and Children's Services* has been established to identify and report on "workable and potentially workable local collaborative strategies to improve employment, education, training and children's services in rural and remote Australia".

The Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce has clearly identified the relatively unique situation often faced by young people in their capacity to access services, including education and training services.

The Commonwealth has made a major commitment to improving education, training, health and social services to indigenous communities, many of which are in the most remote fringes of the nation.

And state governments are making a much more sustained effort to work with all tiers of government, often through new and imaginative, partnership-based, to improve the quality of life in rural areas. It seems that the decline in the provision of services in country areas may now have reached an end point, and indeed recognition of the political volatility of rural electorates makes it likely that new lines of support will be provided.

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Signature: Colin Boyle

Printed Name: COLIN BOYLE

Address: P.O Box 588
Wagga Wagga
NSW 2678
AUSTRALIA

Position*: SENIOR LECTURER

Organization: Charles Sturt Uni

Telephone No: +612-6933-2495

Date: 6-11-2002

* Executive Committee, SPERA